

A Reed, Rex
 300-41.4 Hearts
 AND MINDS
 (orig under Reed)

War is unkind to critics and other living things

By REX REED

The best film at the recent Cannes Festival was a documentary about the Vietnam war called "Hearts and Minds." It was a brutal, mind-blowing experience that shattered every American who saw it, yet the tragedy is that Americans at home might never get the chance to see it. There are injustices every day that fill the newspapers. There are wrongs in the world that make anyone heavy-hearted with sadness. But the problems that face a magnificent film like "Hearts and Minds" are too much to bear.

"Hearts and Minds" was financed by Columbia Pictures and produced by Bert Schneider, a partner in BBS Productions, the company that created "Easy Rider," "The Last Picture Show" and "Five Easy Pieces." BBS is a company dedicated to motion pictures concerned with the quality of American life. "Hearts and Minds," which might well be this company's best and most courageous film to date, was directed by the talented, 37-year-old documentary filmmaker, Peter Davis, whose CBS-TV special "The Selling of the Pentagon" won mountains of prizes and even led to reforms in some Pentagon public relations practices. Now a series of complicated problems are plaguing the film that might make it impossible to obtain a release in the United States. While I was in Cannes, I met with Davis and he explained what happened.

Nothing to do with it

"Columbia financed it," he said, "but they will not have anything to do with its appearance in Cannes and now they are reluctant to show it in America. There are several reasons. Columbia is a corporate structure in a great deal of financial debt. They are in the hands of banks to which they pay \$14 million a year just to repay this debt. Therefore, they are worried about the political implications of the film and also about the possibility that it might have a limited audience and they don't want to lose money. We can't sell it to anyone else because Columbia still owns it. They could just drop it in a hole

somewhere and kill it off that way, but that's the worst thing that could happen to it."

Columbia Pictures spokesmen, on the other hand, say they are not holding the film back because it's controversial. The real reason they haven't expedited the release, they say, is that BBS Productions is suing the studio for "at least \$250,000" for unpaid royalties on "The Last Picture Show" and "Five Easy Pieces." Whatever the reasons, "Hearts and Minds" has not yet been shown to the American people.

This is the only film I have ever seen that sweeps away the gauze surrounding Vietnam and tells the truth. For 10 years, the American public was bombarded daily with body counts from the war as if the number of dead men and women on each side were scores in an endless ballgame. TV news programs covered the holocaust of battle in living and dying color. Some Americans were occasionally reassured by what they saw, others were horrified. Almost everyone was confused. Many said it was the greatest tragedy to hit America since the Civil War. This time our land was not burned, though our soldiers were killed, maimed and imprisoned for reasons that are still not clear in a far-off land about which most people knew nothing and couldn't care less. "Hearts and Minds" is a film about why the United States went to Vietnam, what we did there and what doing it did to us. Peter Davis says: "It's neither pro nor anti-American. It's just an attempt to understand what we have done and what we have become."

That's why there are no Bella Abzugs or Jane Fondas or Tom Haydens in it. Davis was more interested in showing the people who made the war and were actively involved in it rather than the people who opposed it. "My object was to find out why it happened," he says. And find out he did.

Here is Lt. George Coker, from Linden, N.J., forcing his cliches on children in classrooms. Here are American soldiers, telling the cameras: "Almost everyone has blown off firecrackers. The excitement of those explosive hitting their targets is deeply satisfying."

Cut to children with their limbs blown off, wounded mothers weeping for their dead infants; a homeless farmer pointing to a pile of rubble where his kitchen used to be, while the Vietnamese language is translated for Davis through walkie-talkies. Cut to an innocent soldier, wiping away tears, saying: "It was strictly business. We had a job to do and we did it. We never heard any screams."

Never-ending exploitation

The exploitation never ends. First we become involved in the country because the Pentagon tells us to, then we bomb everything in sight, then we take pictures of it. Davis gets it all down for posterity—the Saigon coffin maker who turns out 900 children's-size coffins per week for the babies who die from American bombs, the Army deserters who ran away after eyewitnessing prisoners being pushed out of American helicopters, the Vietnam war profiteers who raced back to their own country after the Paris peace talks to prepare for peace by milking their own people dry.

And there is the other side of the coin: the tragedy of our own boys, bewildered and half-dead, trying to justify their part in the slaughter, and the families of dead soldiers, trying to justify their kids' own funerals. Davis traveled with a camera crew for two years, interviewing not only the men who were there but the leaders and policymakers who formulated the strategies and decisions in Washington.

There is one heartbreaking interview with Daniel Ellsberg, the former Defense Department and Rand Corporation aide, that tells more about Vietnam than any of Richard Nixon's incoherent pep talks. There is another interview with General Westmoreland in which he explains that "Life is plentiful, life is cheap to those people. That is the philosophy of the Orient. You have to realize that an individual life there isn't as important as an individual life in America." There is one horrifying scene in a Vietnamese brothel in which two GIs proudly display the wounds they have inflicted on Vietnamese women.